

## Analysis and Maintenance of Mental Health of Female Teachers in Colleges of China

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**Abstract:** Mental health has received increasing attention over the past few years as a common problem with serious consequences for the health and well-being of the people. But there is little attention paid to the problem for the special group of population, female teachers in China's colleges. Most of them are in a dilemma of how to perform and harmonize the social and family responsibilities well, which has been a heavy burden on them and has a bad effect on their health. Our aim is to assist people to understand and pay great attention to the female teacher's mental health in China's colleges. This article includes issues of situation and classifications of the mental health of the female teachers, i.e. psychology and behavior, body symptom, and professional burnout. The two aspects, objective factors (social factors, work pressure, traditional opinion, gender discrimination and bias) and subjective factors (high self-expectations, poor psychological well-being) of the influencing factors on the mental health of female teachers in China are discussed. With an eye to the future researches on mental health of female teachers in China, we suggest some countermeasures from social, college and individual levels to keep mental health of female teachers in colleges of China.

**Key words:** mental health; female teacher; college; China

Mental health is now recognised internationally as a common problem with serious consequences for the health and well-being of the people. But there is little attention paid to the problem for the special group of population, female teachers in China's colleges. In recent years, females had more and more opportunities to receive the higher education in China; as a result, they had become an important body in academic staff. Statistics showed that the ratio of female teachers in colleges of China had increased from 29.1% in 1990 to 40.7% in 2006 (LIU Wei-ping et al., 2006). Even in some universities, the ratio increased to and exceeded 50% (LIANG Li, 1999). Female teachers were playing a more and more important role in Chinese colleges. It was well accepted in China that teacher was one of the most glorious occupations. But for career women, they must take their families into account at the same time. They took on both the social and family responsibilities. How to perform and harmonize both the opportunities well had been a heavy burden for the female teachers. Most of them were in a dilemma which had a negative effect on their mental health. It was necessary to analyze rationally and thought highly about their mental health status in colleges of China.

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## 1. Background

We searched two most authoritative Chinese databases: the full text database of Chinese academic journals and the full text database of Chinese scientific and technological journals. Keywords were “college”, “female teachers” and “mental health”. We obtained very few relevant publications. The investigation on the social status of Chinese women performed by the China Women’s Federation and the National Bureau of Statistics for the second time showed that 44.8% of the female teachers in the colleges of Shanghai suffered from the insomnia, 58.6% of them often felt physical and mental fatigue, 54.9% had the emotion of worry and irritability, and 48.2% often felt run down. The investigation on 650 female teachers in one of the districts of Guangzhou performed by Guangzhou Traditional Chinese Medicine University showed that 14% of them suffered from anxiety and 55% from depression. Among them, half were eager to receive the psychological counseling. Other investigations also showed that the 29.1% of female teachers had the mild or serious mental health problems in some colleges of Henan province. The major symptoms were interpersonal sensitivity, depression and anxiety. In Chinese colleges, the female teachers’ mental health status was inferior to that of the male (LI Bao-feng, 2001). It was also found that there was significant difference between them and ordinary females on interpersonal sensitivity (ZHAO Yan-li, 2006). Besides, there were kinds of reports on female teachers’ mental health problems in Zhejiang, Beijing and Nanjing (WANG Xiao-mei et al., 2002; CHEN Jian-xiang et al., 2004; HOU Jun et al., 1998; FAN Cun-xin et al., 2004). The report of *2005 Chinese Women Life Quality* showed that following the media workers and medical workers, the female educators ranked the third as responding to the item of “feeling much pressure”, and accounted for 60%. It could be concluded that the female teachers in colleges of China have the serious mental health problems and it should not be neglected again.

Based on the current situation, the main mental health problems of the Chinese college female teachers can be classified into three groups:

(1) Psychology and behavior: The major mental health problems in the female teachers were anxiety, jealousy, depression, confusion, interpersonal sensitivity, lack of security, and so on. If these negative emotions were not promptly vented, it would lead to a deeper level of negative behaviors, such as impulsion and crankiness.

(2) Body symptom: Ill mental health would lead to the deteriorating physical conditions of women teachers in colleges in China, mainly as follows: continuous fatigue, weakness, memory loss, impaired concentration and insomnia. The survey, aiming at women teachers with the senior titles, carried out by the Commission of women in Shanghai education system and the social gender development and research center of Fudan University in Shanghai, showed that 10%~20% of them tended to be more nervous, anxious, dizzy, and suffered from neck and back pain, 20%~30% often felt fatigue and debility, stomachache and dyspepsia, and 30% were not easy to fall asleep at most of the time and had no adequate sleeping.

(3) Professional burnout: The burnout of the college female teachers was the state of emotion, attitude and behavior failure after experiencing long-term pressure. The teachers’ burnout state had not only a negative impact on physical and mental health of themselves, but also a tremendous negative impact on the students’ growth and development. A survey indicated that 70% of female teachers had no ambitions in their teaching and research. They didn’t want to be the best and only went with it well as long as not to be the worst. They were passive when facing the challenges and opportunities. In addition, most of them were inclined to lose their enthusiasm for work, had little interest in personal accomplishment, took no pride in their profession and had a lower efficiency in the work (LIU Yu, 2005).

## 2. Influencing Factors on Mental Health of the Female Teachers in Colleges of China

The psychological problems of Chinese female teachers in colleges were a result of the interaction of the subjective and objective factors.

### 2.1 Objective factors

2.1.1 Social factors: The female teachers who had received higher education were the elite in Chinese women. It was taken for granted that they were the examples both in career and in morality for other women, which meant that they would have more obligations to dedicate to the society. They should become models for all women and be the outstanding group in the women. At the same time their students wanted to obtain more knowledge from them. As a result, the female teachers must devote more time and energy to the complex, arduous and tense work. But it was in a state of imbalance between their payment and repayment. Facing with the social material temptations, their identities of “traditional conscience as intellectuals” were continuously doubted by themselves.

2.1.2 Work pressure: With the increasingly competition in the universities, the female teachers were bearing heavier and heavier pressure in their work. First, China’s colleges and universities were expanding enrollment. Almost every university had the problem of teacher shortage; consequently, the female teachers had to overwork with longer hours. Furthermore, with the continuously deepening of education reform, the updating of modern education technology and tools had a higher demand for teachers, which in turn made the females pay more efforts to keep up with the development of the society. Second, the female teachers also took on the role of researchers which put a heavy burden on them, for that academic researches were closely related with the evaluations of personal abilities and achievements in China, such as professional titles and the economic status. But in many universities, there were not clear academic standards, and even in some places, academic corruption led malignant competition. As a disadvantaged group, the female teachers had been negatively impacted.

2.1.3 Traditional opinion: With the influence of the traditional opinions, the society was strengthening family roles on females when they competed with males. It was clearly reflected in such a saying that “women with virtue come from those who are less informed”, which had long been a hinder for development of Chinese women. Another example was that “man is responsible for outdoor affairs while woman for the indoors”. When internalized as their code of conduct, it not only affected males, but also had a profound impact on females. The female teachers had received a high-level and formal education, and achieved ideological awareness and economic independence which made them out of the husband-right-centered traditional opinion. But many female teachers were still bewildered by them consciously or unconsciously.

A survey performed by one of the colleges in Zhejiang province showed that 66% of women believed that they would return to the family and 85.4% opposed that it should be the males who made sacrifices when there are conflicts between families and causes. And 79.8% of the teachers said they would feel guilty and blame themselves if they care little for the family because of the hard work.

2.1.4 Gender discrimination and bias: Compared with the number of male teachers, the females were not dominant both in the professional titles and work positions. The higher levels, the less females, just like a pyramid. Took the year of 1993 as an example, the number of female teachers in the common colleges accounted for 30.9% in the total teachers. Among them, female professors, associate professors, lecturers, assistants accounted for 12.01%, 21.93%, 32.89%, 41.38%, respectively (ZHANG Jian-qi, 1997). It was generally assumed that the male succeeded more in the work than the female. Such opinion also had a passive impact on the females. Influenced by such stereotype, the universities didn’t give the equal opportunities to the female and the male teachers for their

further development. Compared with males, the females were often in inferior positions and had fewer learning opportunities. All of these not only limited the development of the female teachers but reduced their likelihood of being successful. Therefore, the college female teachers were likely to feel burnout in working.

## **2.2 Subjective factors**

2.2.1 High Self-expectations: As a special group of women, the female teachers had received the higher education and had a strong self-concept. They had higher expectations on themselves and were urgent to develop themselves in their careers. Many female teachers thought they should maintain perfect images when facing the students, parents, even the whole society. They demanded themselves to do everything perfectly. If there was a little flaw in their behaviors, a sense of guilt would overwhelm them. An investigation performed by the China Women's Federation indicated that 90.9% of the female teachers in Beijing University thought women should have their own position both in careers and in families. Failing in either field, she would not be a successful woman. While the survey on the female teachers of colleges in Shanghai showed that 50% of them expected to have the title of professor, 33.9% for assistant professor. The higher expectation for promotion indicated that the females had strong desires for accomplishments and self-realization.

2.1.2 Poor psychological well-being: As the “engineers of human souls”, the female teachers assumed multiple roles—learners, propagators of knowledge, researchers, educators, friends of the students, good wives and mothers. Under such circumstances, the females should have better self-regulating skills, role-changing ability, and mental state to adapt to the multiple roles. However, according to the surveys, the females had poor abilities and strategies of anti-anxiety. They tended to be more nervous and scared. Quite a number of women teachers showed symptoms of compulsion and indecision. The contradiction between poor mental state and few effective tactics had been a major reason resulting in the psychological problems in the college female teachers.

## **3. Measures to Keep Mental Health of Female Teachers in Colleges of China**

According to the reasons and factors, the follows measurements should be taken to keep mental health of the female teachers.

### **3.1 Social level**

The characteristics of the higher education and the female teachers in the universities should be fully understood. The whole society should pay attention to the female teachers' mental health. The whole society should be concerned about and back up the higher education. The whole society should care and support for the mental health of the female teachers. The government should formulate relevant policies and regulations to improve the life of the college female teachers, to eliminate the gender bias and safeguard their legitimate rights and interests. A set of criteria should be formulated in the screening, training and qualifying of the female teachers. And a supervisory mechanism should be established.

### **3.2 College level**

3.2.1 Caring for the psychological seeks: The female teachers of college were a special group of the Chinese women. They had comprehensive inner world and delicate emotional experiences. They tended to pay much attention to the spiritual needs of themselves. Therefore, while meeting their mundane needs, the relevant agencies should be more concerned about their spiritual demands. For instance, providing more learning and researching opportunities to meet their need of development, encouraging them to participate in management and decision-making of the college which could create a free and fair environment for their opinions and suggestions

to be expressed and appreciated, and satisfying their needs for improving self-esteem.

3.2.2 Making the educational plan on mental health: The state of female teachers' mental health had an important effect on their educational abilities and would undoubtedly influence the students in one way or another. It should be got enough attention from the education departments of government. The mental health education should include the sustainable programs for the female teachers. For example, offering psychological training courses, inviting experts to solve the psychological problems of college women teachers, helping them to deal with the conflicts between role and personal values. The questionnaires should be regularly distributed to timely explore their psychological status. The mental health counseling agencies should be set up to help them to deal with the psychological problems. The knowledge of the mental health should be propagandized by means of television, radio, newspapers and other media to strengthen the self-psychological health of female teachers, to provide the concrete methods and skills of anti-frustration and to optimize personalities.

### 3.3 Individual level

The female teachers should recognize that some of the social norms, such as “man is responsible for outdoor affairs while woman for the indoors”, were traditional, unreasonable and unfair to the women. The female teachers must consciously resist the old traditional opinions and forces to enhance the mental bearing abilities. They should have the courage to face the inequity, learn how to resolve the conflicts in a positive manner and to adjust themselves to balance the work and the rest. It was necessary for them to cultivate hobbies to enjoy their leisure time. As women, they were assumed to change roles in different contexts and to have the wisdom of choosing the most valuable role when reconciliation of different roles impossible. Eventually, they should familiar with the skills of time managing to prioritize and reasonably arrange the daily lives.

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